# On canvas and in life, Ulsh painted a colorful world

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Bob Smith May 10, 2018

BREMERTON — Bob Ulsh's weak heart finally gave out March 28 after years of fighting the effects of a major heart attack and two serious strokes over two decades.

But ironically, if there's a lasting legacy that can be attributed to the gentle, inquisitive nature and maritime painter and historian from Bremerton, it was just how big Ulsh's heart really was.

Big enough, in fact, that legions of art lovers in the South Kitsap area were the beneficiaries of his knowledge and mentorship as an oil painter. He was a driving force as a longtime president of the South Kitsap Art Association and a frequent exhibitor at the Sidney Art Gallery in Port Orchard.

As his close friend and fellow painter Roy Carr said, if you had a question about the composition of the oils in a paint color, Bob Ulsh was the guy to ask.

"He's left a legacy," Carr said of his friend. "He worked with the South Kitsap Artists Association and the Sidney Gallery for years, and everybody knows his approach to art."

In fact, Carr said, Ulsh wrote a book about the composition of painting oils. “He could tell you which ones to stay away from,” he said.

In addition to his passion for art, Ulsh was something of a historian, particularly about the history of the Mosquito Fleet, an assorted group of small steam vessels carrying passengers and freight that plied the waters of Puget Sound in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

He was inspired by his father’s experience as a first mate on the Arcadia, a Mosquito Fleet vessel that ran between his boyhood home of Lakebay, on the east side of Key Peninsula, and Tacoma. The Kitsap Historical Museum in downtown Bremerton has a copy of his extensive notebook containing his original research on the specifics about the fleet’s locally owned vessels that ran on the waters of Puget Sound.

“He was just a fountain of information and had all this stuff in his mind,” Carr said. “You could ask him a question and he’d lay it all out for you. He’ll be greatly missed.”

At the time of his death, Sandy said her husband had completed his memoirs and had plans to get it published.

Ulsh’s wife Sandy quietly noted that on June 22, the couple would have celebrated their 50th anniversary of marriage. Instead, on the following day — June 23 — she and their son, Brian, extended family members and Ulsh’s many friends and acquaintances will gather at the Sidney Art Gallery in Port Orchard from 1-4 p.m. to host a celebration of her husband’s full and active 87 years of life.

The Sidney Art Gallery is an appropriate place to celebrate Ulsh’s life. It’s where he and Carr, who shared an enduring friendship formed at work and forged through their hobby of painting, hosted a number of art exhibits over the years.

Their most recent exhibit at the art gallery was in 2016, good-naturedly called “Two Old Geezers,” featured some of their favorite artwork.

But perhaps Ulsh’s best-known project — a 12-panel mural he painted that depicts a timeline of Port Orchard’s history beginning in the late 1880s — rests on the gallery’s west exterior wall.

Bob Ulsh (left) and Roy Carr stand in front of a 12-panel mural outside the Sidney Art Gallery and Museum that Ulsh painted depicting a timeline of Port Orchard's history beginning in the 1880s. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News photo 2016)

He showed off the results of his work in 2016 for a feature article that appeared in the Independent prior to the "Two Old Geezers" show.

In a poignant tribute to their comrade in art, Carr and fellow members of the South Kitsap Artists Association group will unveil, in Ulsh's memory, a metal bench perched on a cement foundation. Painted green, his favorite color, it will sit in a fitting location — underneath the Sidney museum building's mural.

Sandy Ulsh, who still plays in the violin section of the Bremerton Symphony, said a brass quintet from the orchestra will play outside on the gallery lawn during the gathering. A selection of her husband's paintings also will be on display at the event.

Carr will serve as the ceremony's host and plans to share a few stories about their experiences as artistic "partners in crime" over the years.

Old friends Roy Carr (left) and Bob Ulsh. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News photo 2016)

“We were friends for 40 years, so we got to know each other pretty well,” Carr said.

“I have a few tales to tell about our time together at some of the art exhibits we’ve had.”

**A ‘people person’**

About a month and a half after Bob’s death, Sandy — tears welling up — recalled memories from their married life.

“He liked people,” she said. “He loved meeting people. He honestly never met anybody he didn’t like — unlike me. We were very opposite in that regard.

“We would have people coming in and out of our house all the time, picking his brain about the Mosquito Fleet, painting and stuff. I would be in the kitchen cooking dinner and wonder what he was getting out of this, but he loved it.”

The couple first met at the wedding of Sandy’s cousin; she was a bridesmaid and Bob a groomsman. For Sandy, at least, it was love at first sight meeting the older man, who was 14 years her senior.

“I’d never dated — I wasn’t even 21 at the time,” she said. “I had no history in that at all, but he was really good-looking. There was just something about him.”

Sandy managed to wrangle a ride home from him following the wedding. After he walked her to her front door, she asked him: “Tell me, how come somebody who is as eligible as you appear to be, hasn’t married by now? He said, ‘Well, I like my freedom.’ I looked at him in the eye and lied through my teeth, and said, ‘Well, that just suits me fine because I like my freedom, too.’

“And two-and-a-half years later, we were married. I knew what I wanted, and I went after it,” she laughed.

The Ulshes were married in 1968, and Bob soon took a job at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. At the time of their marriage, Sandy said he owned a vintage Cessna airplane (“I still remember it’s tail designation: N3122A.”) and had a pilot’s license. He was a founding member of the Kitsap Aviation Squadron, which at one time operated out of Port Orchard. The couple occasionally flew in the aircraft on trips, including a visit to Mexico shortly after marrying.

A noteworthy airborne trip pointed him and some buddies to Central America, including a fateful visit to Nicaragua, when dictator Anastasio Somoza dispatched a squadron of troops to meet their airplane after it landed.

Ulsh — who later said “we all didn’t have a brain in our heads” — and his friends were rescued by the immigration officials, who put the Americans on a taxi and had them whisked away.

He took early retirement after serving as a technical writer-technician at the shipyard, only to suffer a major heart attack in 1996.

A period of improved health was disrupted in 2009 when he had his first major stroke. After spending a week in Harrison Hospital and a month rehabilitating at St. Joseph, Ulsh had to learn how to walk again, Sandy recalled. He also had to teach himself how to paint once more.

Then in 2014, his second stroke came along, affecting his coordination. Sadly, the setback mostly curtailed his painting activities.

Bob was born in 1931 to Marvel Mattie and James Woodburn Ulsh in Lakebay. His three sisters, Minnie, Viola and Evelyn, preceded him in death. Bob and Sandy’s son Brian lives in Seabeck.

The elder Ulsh is also survived by his brother, Leslie “Bud” (Delores) Ulsh, who lives at the family homestead in Lakebay.

**Remembering Bob:**

**A Celebration of Bob Ulsh’s Life**

1-4 p.m. on Saturday, June 23

Sidney Art Gallery and Museum

202 Sidney Ave.

Port Orchard